SPECIAL ARTICLE

Constructivism and psychotherapy

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Constructivism is a metatheoretical perspective that embraces diverse traditions in medicine, philosophy, psychology, and spiritual wisdom. Constructive psychotherapy emphasizes complex cycles in the natural ordering and reorganizing processes that characterize all development in living systems. Individuals are encouraged to view themselves as active participants in their lives. Within rich contexts of human relationship and symbol systems, people make new meanings as they develop. Techniques from many different traditions can help people find and refine their sense of balance as they develop.

Key words: Constructivism, systems, development, psychotherapy

The question has been raised: "What is it about constructivism that is new or different?" This question bespeaks its own presumption. To ask how constructivism differs from other views is to presume that difference is important. This is one of the ordering principles acknowledged by constructivism. We tend to think in categories, such as similarity and difference. Constructivism is not a new tree in the forest. It is, rather, a glimpse of the connectivity among all trees, along with their elaborately networked supports. What is developing is not just a new theory or model. Constructivism is a perspective on personal psychology, social functioning, and human change. It is both old and new. Unity and diversity are being integrated in ways that speak to traditions of holism and hope. Dialogues are taking place that suggest an evolutionary leap in our understanding of what it means to be human. The emphasis is on connection rather than separation. Differentiation is a necessary and natural part of development, but it can stagnate into separation and isolationism. Integration can sometimes oversimplify or reduce the attention given to important differences. Constructivism is emerging as a metaperspective that recursively recognizes its necessary limitations at the same time that it embraces a hope of continuing development. Brain, body, emotions, and social embeddedness are honored. And spirit – in its marvelous spectrum of meanings – pervades.

Constructivism emphasizes the dynamic structure of human experience. The verb 'to construct' means to organize or create order. Structure tends to have connotations of a static phenomenon. Life and human consciousness are anything but static. Hence, one of the central emphases of constructivism is process. Psychological stability is viewed within the context of process, not to be viewed in opposition to process. Consider the apparent stability of the body. The human body recomposes itself every seven years. Just as the human body decomposes and regenerates, a parallel psychological renewal evolves through a synchrony of continuity and change.

Constructivism is a philosophy of participation in which individuals and communities are encouraged to be active in their own unfolding. Constructive psychotherapy includes a diversity of techniques. It is not defined by specific techniques but rather by the individuation and developmental pacing of different techniques. More importantly, a constructive approach to psychotherapy emphasizes the importance of human relationships in well-being and development. The constructive therapist collaborates with the client in seeking to foster the unique ways that the client achieves proactive change. Hence, the goal of therapy is proactive change vis-a-vis change that happens in the course of human *being*. The collaborative therapeutic alliance is an egalitarian (non-authoritarian) contract that distributes the responsibilities for change. Although the client is the primary change agent, the therapist brings clinical expertise and a human "vested" interest in the change process. Clients are not viewed as objects, but as agents. Psychotherapy is not something done *to* them but *by* them.

THE ESSENCE OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism is expressed in a range of perspectives on human experiencing. Constructivist themes can be found in Asian philosophy (Lao Tzu and Buddha), Western philosophy (Heraclitus, Kant, Vico, Schopenhauer and Vaihinger), and in the works of a plethora of pioneer and contemporary psychologists (Adler, Bandura, Bruner, Bugental, Frankl, Gergen, Goolishian, Kelly, Piaget and Watzlawick). From the diversity of such works as these, one can draw five basic themes that constitute the essence of constructivism. These themes are: a) active agency, b) order, c) self, d) social-symbolic relatedness, and e) lifespan development. Succinct statements of each theme will be followed by a brief elaboration.

Constructivism is a meta-perspective from which:

- Human experiencing involves continuous *active agency*.
- Much human activity is devoted to *ordering processes* – the organizational patterning of experience. These ordering processes are fundamentally emotional, tacit, and categorical (they depend on contrasts), and they are the essence of meaning-making.
- The organization of personal activity is fundamentally self-referent or recursive, making the body a fulcrum

of experiencing and encouraging a deep phenomenological sense of *selfhood* or *personal identity.*

- Self-organizing capacities and creations of meaning are strongly influenced by *social-symbolic processes*; persons exist in living webs of relationships, all of which are mediated by language and symbol systems.

Each human life reflects principles of *dynamic dialectical development*; complex flows among essential tensions (contrasts) are reflected in patterns and cycles of experiencing that can lead to episodes of disorder (disorganization) and, under some circumstances, the reorganization (transformation) of core patterns of activity, including meaning-making and both self- and social relationships.

Activity

Like existential philosophy, constructivism maintains that humans are active participants in their own lives. People make choices that make important differences in their lives and in the lives of all with whom they are connected. Humans are often reactive, to be sure. Constructivism does not deny one's capacity for unreflective reflex and conditioning. But the drive to survive is also fundamentally proactive. We anticipate. We lean into life. We fall forward into our being. And just like the skydiver in free fall, our posture in that process influences its form and direction. We are moving in the midst of forces far greater than ourselves, and yet we have voice and choice within those forces. There are factors outside our command, but we can learn to better read them and to attach more viable meanings and take actions that better serve our movement. And, lest all of this sounds a bit ambitious or audacious, we can also learn the sacred art of stillness and acceptance in the never-ending dance of effort and surrender.

The central point of this first theme is that humans are not passive pawns in life. We are agents that act on and in the world. Hence the emphasis on self-efficacy (1,2) and knowing (3,4). In constructivism, the individual is considered to be an active agent in the process of experiencing.

Order

The second principle of constructivism acknowledges that we need order. We organize our worlds and we respond to the order within them. We find patterns and create meanings (5-7), and we do most of this by means of which we are mostly unaware. We are creatures of habit, to be sure, and well might we wonder whether it is we who possess our habits or our habits that possess us. Almost as quickly as we learn a new skill, we become mindless of it. It goes underground, so to speak, and enters into the root structure of our life patterning. This process of automaticity applies not only to our physical actions, but also to our patterns of thinking and feeling. Although we may long to change, constancy and integrity maintain a powerful momentum. This is why the most important changes in our lives may require ruptures and repairs to the very fabric of our lives.

Human mentation is both proactive and generative. We are self-organizing and active in determining our own evolution. Maturana and Varela (8) coined the term *autopoiesis* to represent this human self-organizing capacity. Meaning supercedes the mere processing of sensory-based input. The ordering of one's experience and personal history cataloguing are both highly idiosyncratic and dynamic. As a consequence, meanings can stabilize as well as change with the passage of time. Much of this stabilization and change occurs outside the bounds of our conscious self – at the tacit level (9).

Constructivists contend that "individual human systems organize themselves so as to protect and perpetuate their integrity, and they develop via structural differentiations" (10). This ordering proceeds with self as the reference point in giving meaning to life experience and in the promotion of survival (9). Psychological change lies in the domain of the self, albeit a socially embedded self. Selfhood will be addressed in the following section.

Our emotions develop as powerful biological forces in our self-organization. Emotions serve critical roles in directing our attention, shaping our perceptions, organizing our memory, and motivating our active engagement with the learning that life relentlessly requires of us. We feel our way. Constructivism views emotions as central to human experiencing (11). Feeling is not bad or dangerous or unhealthy. On the contrary, not feeling or fighting against what we are feeling is a more formidable threat to our health and well-being. Our relationships with our feelings are often at least as important as the feelings themselves. This point has important implications for our understanding of what it means to be human and how we may proceed in constructive psychotherapy (12,13).

Self

We organize our worlds by first organizing ourselves (14).

Biological self-regulation emerges from bodily experiences. Early in life we struggle to separate ourselves from our caregivers – to individuate into a coherent and differentiated identity. The body and its boundaries become an axis for the organization of experience. Like our relationships with our emotions, our relationships with our bodies may become complicated and painful. And at a more abstract level, one's relationship with one's self is of greatest complexity. All psychotherapy is, in a sense, a psychotherapy of the self (9) – an act of assistance in self-organization.

The uniqueness of each self-organizing life is emphasized in constructivism. Terms emphasize individual being (Adler), recursive self-construction (Maturana, Varela), and the personal nature of the order created (15). The unique perspective of the experiencing agent is honored. Moreover, what individuals experience is integrally related to how they have learned to create an orderly reference

point – a metaphorical center. The "who" that is experiencing is one of the most elusive phenomena in consciousness. The self is a process, not an entity. And the self is not separated or isolated. Another way to say this might be that the self is a fluid coherence of perspective from which one experiences. But the sense of self emerges and changes primarily in relationship to others.

Humans develop ever-increasing sets of self-conceptions over time. One's activated "self" is the one that "reflects meaningful links between the demands of the situation and self-conceptualizations related to those cues" (16). Hence, one's "active" sense of self is socially influenced and is never a complete representation of one's being. One goal of constructivism is the self-directed expansion of the client's self-conceptualizations in ways that promote well-being.

Social-symbolic relatedness

Much of the order that we seek and the meaning that we create emerges out of what we experience with one another. We are born in relationship and it is in relationship that we most extensively live and learn (1). Our languages lack words to adequately convey our social and symbolic embeddedness. Throughout psychology and philosophy there are creative gestures at capturing the elusive ever-presence of "alterity", "intersubjectivity", and "interbeing". A simplifying analogy would be a fish trying to describe water. Plato was making much the same point in his allegory of the cave. The words that you are now reading are more than symbols on a page of paper. What they invoke in your experience depends on a vast network of relationships (17-19). Some words and concepts will be more familiar than others. The less familiar ones may give you occasional pause, and you may unconsciously interpret them in terms of what is more familiar. What is familiar and comfortable depends on your personal history, the vocabulary and concepts closest to you, and so on. These are, in turn, reflections of your vast connections with people and ideas (past and present).

The active organization of a self takes place "in" a body but also simultaneously "with" and "through" social bonds and systems of symbols. We humans are fundamentally social creatures, and there is no meaningful way of separating our sociality from our symbolic capacities. We may talk about living "in" our heads because we spend so much time thinking, but the form and structure of our thinking is itself relational. One of our favorite ways of organizing our own experience and relating to one another is through stories (3,4). In other words, a large part of our meaning-making is experienced and expressed as narrative (story). Our stories are our selves.

Lifespan development

Constructivism emphasizes developmental processes (14). Attachment history and the individual's psychosocial development shape self-knowledge including self-schemas, abstract rules, and expectations for interacting interpersonally and with the environment (20). The lifelong dynamics of our development are characterized by cycles and spirals of experiencing. Sometimes we develop via "baby steps" of gradual change. Sometimes life demands a large leap. Changes outside of us and inside us may suddenly emerge. When these changes are large, we may undergo a personal revolution characterized by pervasive loss – of meaning, life order, control, identity, and hope. In the face of overwhelming challenges, it is common to do two seemingly opposite things: rigidify and disorganize. We resist the challenge to change. At the same time, however, if the challenge persists or increases, we show signs of variability. Our usual patterns of order begin to disintegrate. This is particularly evident in cycles of energy, moods, sleep, attention, ap-petite and digestion. Our formerly "normal" life – much like Kuhn's (21-23) "normal science" – begins to deviate from its own norms. Such variability and disorganization – lite-ral "disorder" – are natural expressions of a life that is trying to reorganize itself. The shift from an old order to a new one is seldom easy or painless. But it can be "naturalized" and facilitated by a therapist who appreciates the developmental dynamics of self-organizing systems.

A constructive approach to psychotherapy does not deny the struggles of life or the pain of losing meaning or balance. It does not promise quick and easy solutions to tragedies and lifelong struggles. What constructive therapy does offer is compassion and hope borne of an understanding and trust in the powerful wisdom of life processes re-organizing themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

The themes elucidated above are evident in constructivists' conceptualizations of what it means to be human and how to help people change through psychotherapy. Therapy goals, forming and maintaining the therapeutic relationship, change techniques, and ways of appraising change are derived from these principles. Constructivism is focused on possibilities, strengths and personal resources, human resilience, and the promise inherent in lifelong change (24). Distress and disturbance are considered necessary components of significant human change and, to this end, emotional awareness and expression are both honored and promoted. The therapeutic relationship is one of respectful collaboration, trust, safety, and activity. The meaning making achieved through this alliance produces expanded conceptualizations of the past and promotes a future vision of promise.

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